

Power Encounter Among Folk Muslims: An Essential Key of the Kingdom

Power encounter is not the only key to reaching the hearts of Muslims, but it needs to be an essential factor to effectively evangelize Folk Muslims and to plant the Church of Jesus Christ in their midst.

by Rick Love

Greg Livingstone, General Director of Frontiers, a mission agency focused exclusively on the Muslim world, likes to tell a humorous story of the early days of Frontiers. Greg asked one of his Pentecostal missionaries how he was planning to reach Muslims. The missionary replied, "I'm going to raise the dead!" Shaking his head, Greg queried, "Do you have a plan b"?

People usually laugh at this story. But the majority of missionaries working among Folk Muslims wrestle with the supernatural issues that confront them.

More than three-fourths of the Muslim world, of approximately 800 million people, are folk Muslims, who are doctrinally Muslim but in practice are animists. Folk Muslims confess Allah, but worship spirits. They are more concerned with magic than they are about Muhammad.

Frontiers missionaries have shared accounts with me of Folk Islam in every region where we serve: North Africa, the Middle East, Central Asia, South Asia and Southeast Asia. I have interviewed workers in other missions as well who gave further confirmation of these phenomena.

For example, there is a widespread fear of curses among Folk Muslims. Tunisians are afraid that someone will find their fingernail trimmings and use that to curse them. In Yemen, they prefer using a person's hair to curse someone (both cases illustrate what is known as contagious magic). In Jordan, one worker talks about "blood blessings" as a frequent practice. If someone buys a car, they will sacrifice a lamb and place the blood on the bumper of the

car for protection from the forces of darkness. When a new house is built, they also sacrifice a lamb and its blood is applied to the door frames.

Morocco actually has "occultic fairs" called *moussems* which draw as many as 20,000 people! During these "satanic signs and wonders conferences", people gather in small groups all over the countryside to witness supernatural feats, to offer blood sacrifices, and to receive *baraka* (blessing). One friend told me of people, who possessed by spirits, would slash themselves with knives with no cuts or bleeding. Others would dance in trances, take bites of bread and then throw the bread out so the crowd could receive the *baraka*. Two other veteran workers described certain people possessed by animal spirits (like a lion or tiger spirit), who would actually kill and devour a live animal (like a cow) with their bare hands.

But there is a lighter side to Folk Islam. A love potion in Morocco is used to keep men faithful to their wives. This magical potion is served in tea and includes the wife's urine. With a hearty laugh, an Arab worker told me that "every man in Morocco has drunk his wife's urine, from the king down to the poorest peasant!"

After interviewing one worker from Egypt about various types of magical practices among Folk Muslims, including weekly all-night exorcism ceremonies, he exclaimed, "Dallas Theological Seminary didn't prepare me for this!" To be fair, however, most seminaries don't.

Regardless of seminary background or denominational heritage, the issues of signs and wonders challenge everyone

involved in reaching Folk Muslims. Demons and magicians are no respectors of theological heritage! For example, one non-charismatic missionary with Frontiers in Central Asia (a Baptist by denomination and a Campus Crusader by training) led a Muslim shaman to Christ. Even though this Muslim convert wanted to serve Christ, he was still drawn to shamanistic practices. Truth encounter alone was not enough!

When some non-charismatic Frontiers leaders came to encourage and coach this missionary, they were questioned about spirit realm issues and signs and wonders. Since they had not dealt with this before, they encouraged him to contact other Frontiers missionaries who had experience. He sent out an email to a number of our missionaries and within twenty four hours received counsel from five other team leaders. This missionary to Central Asia told me recently that every time their Muslim convert church meets they have a healing service!

A Presbyterian missionary in Central Asia describes his experiences of power encounter in one of his prayer letters as follows:

You may find it interesting to know that we have seen more cases of "demonization" here than anywhere we have ever been before [he has served in two other Muslim countries]. We see cases weekly in cell meetings and on Sunday. The stories I could tell you would really shock some of you. But this is reality here. We are making inroads into a people group where the Gospel has never existed before... Have you ever seen a demonized person scream and yell, because the written Word of God was being read or spoken? We have!

Although once the exclusive domain of Pentecostal and Charismatic Christianity, the issue of power encounter is now a major concern of the broader evangelical world. It is an important aspect of reaching Folk Muslims. Power encounter—the demonstration of God’s power over Satan (primarily in healing and exorcism)—plays an essential role in reaching Folk Muslims. Power encounter certainly is not *the* key to the Kingdom (as some from signs and wonders backgrounds seem to assume), but nevertheless is an essential key to unlock doors to reaching Folk Muslims (as those from a more traditional evangelical background often fail to realize).

It would seem that signs of the kingdom (power encounter) should lead to the exalting of the King. This is often not the case, however, since Folk Muslims want healing and usually do not care where it comes from. In other words, people seeking power do not necessarily seek the Savior. God has used many people in Frontiers in a ministry of signs and wonders. But few of those healed came to Christ! (We do believe they are much more receptive to Christ however). A co-worker of mine estimates that one out of ten who are healed are following Christ. He compares this with the healing of the ten lepers, when only one healed leper returns to give thanks to Jesus.

One reason for this lack of conversions is the Folk Muslim’s worldview. Because they live in a world of magic and miracles, they are not always awestruck by demonstrations of God’s power. On the other hand, if we demonstrate no power they are even less impressed!

When I first went to the field I was looking for that dramatic power encounter that would lead to a major breakthrough among the Sundanese. I had the encounter but without the breakthrough! It happened during martial arts training (known as *pencak silat*).

I was preparing to go to America and my instructor (Mr. Agus, the founder of Manderaga) was giving me a personal lesson. He started teaching me breathing exercises that were linked to a shoving-type motion. In between exercises, he was telling me stories about the power to knock people over [from a distance without touching them, known as *tanaga dalam*—inner power]...as well as the power to heal. He said he himself had often experienced these things. So, I asked him if he would give an example, since I had heard many stories, but had never experienced it.

He told me to get into a certain stance and then he started to give me the *tanaga dalam* shove (from a distance). As he did this, I was praying against the powers of darkness in the name of Jesus. When nothing happened, he asked me to get in another stance. Again, the same shove, the same prayers and the same results. After trying this for a number of times, he asked me if I wanted to try.

Since I had never done this before, I copied the *tanaga dalam* shove that I had seen. He stood about five feet in front of me. I gave him the shove, simultaneously praying in the name of Jesus. To my shock, he went flying backwards as if Mike Tyson had hit him. I hadn’t touched him at all, and yet a power surged from me that knocked him backwards. This happened a few more times. Finally he stopped, shock his head, prayed, and with a pale, flustered look on his face, he said meekly, ‘Let’s continue our exercise.’ (Taken from my field notes).

This encounter did not lead Mr. Agus to Christ. Because of my experience I take great comfort in 2 Cor 12- 12. “The signs of a true apostle were performed among you with all perseverance, by signs and wonders and miracles.” The great pioneer church planter describes his ministry in terms of power encounter. His ministry was characterized by the supernatural. It was also characterized by “all perseverance.”

Many reject our message from the start. Even those who are healed often reject Christ. But with power and “all perseverance” we will see churches established among Folk Muslims.

Some of my closest friends and

coworkers in Southeast Asia have had similar experiences. They had often prayed for the sick. Some were healed, some weren’t. But even when there were manifestations of power, people didn’t repent. Nevertheless, this couple has persevered and within the last couple of years they have seen breakthroughs because of signs and wonders. In one case, a national couple serving with them, cast numerous demons out of a Muslim, who then repented along with his family. The man delivered from demons has become the bridge into the community! But I’ll let them tell their own story (from personal correspondence).

Samson, [a local shaman] unable to sleep due to the occult forces in his life made the rounds from shaman to shaman seeking to be delivered of his powers. However, none were able to free him...One evening some time later, Samson went on a rampage, tearing his house apart and shouting wildly. Priscilla and Aquila [the national couple working with our colleagues] ran to his home (200 yards away) and began to cast out demons in the name of “The Lord Isa Al Masih”. Not experienced in this, they were amazed to observe many different entities” leave him, each with its own name and voice. That night all of his amulets and weapons were burned and buried. Beginning the next day, this shaman, who was once feared by all the neighbors and who had in the past committed hideous sins, was now asking forgiveness of neighbors and witnessing to his family. Several months later, in September of 1993, Samson and his wife, his daughter and son-in-law, and one of Aquila’s nieces who now lived with him, were baptized. [They]... have become the nucleus of a small...fellowship.

The issue of power encounter or signs and wonders is not just necessary for evangelistic breakthroughs. It is also a crucial part of the building up of the church. Two things frequently happen in a Folk Islamic context that make power encounter a central part of the pastoral process.

First of all, I believe “*deliverance*” needs to be a part of the rite of

baptism. People who come out of Folk Islam are immersed in spirit powers, charms and amulets. We cannot simply ask them to repent in a general way and believe that this is sufficient. I find it more than just an interesting historical fact that exorcism was a part of baptismal preparation in the early church.

In April of 1995, I had the privilege of participating in a baptism of a Folk Muslim convert that included deliverance. The baptism ceremony began with a prayer of renunciation prior to the actual baptism. Everyone being baptized made a public renunciation of any type of magic. They publicly declared, "I renounce every act of seeking power for myself through magic, charms or amulets of any kind".

Then the pastor asked each baptismal candidate if they had been involved in magic of any kind. Only one man admitted that he had. (In this particular baptism many of the candidates were teenagers who had not been involved in magic.) Next, the leaders of the church took the man into a different room and had a special deliverance for him. The pastor challenged him to say "Jesus is Lord of my life". At first he couldn't. So we prayed against the forces of darkness and continued to tell the man being prayed for to submit himself fully to the Lord. He then confessed Jesus as Lord, along with renouncing every form of occultic practices. Finally, he convulsed, the spirits left and he was set free.

This leads to a second point about power ministry among converts from Folk Islam. *It is very typical for those converted from Folk Islam to revert and go to a shaman in times of crises.* Another man in this same congregation had gone to a shaman just prior to the baptismal service described above. When the man who had gone to a shaman heard the prayer of renunciation and heard the testimony of the other man's

deliverance, he confessed his sin in this area and was also prayed for.

A close friend of mine who has served more than eight years in Southeast Asia among Folk Muslims has seen much fruit. But he has also experienced his share of suffering and setbacks. His Navigator training and Baptist heritage have not prepared him for the spiritual warfare he has encountered. He said that the powers of darkness are the hardest things he has had to face in his ministry. He believes that most of the young converts he works with still suffer from various levels of demonization. Because of this, he now sets aside time at the end of almost every public meeting for repentance and prayers of deliverance.

Repentance in a Folk Islamic context must involve both renunciation of occultic practices and deliverance from these forces. The texts that have been most helpful to me in this regard are Deut 18:9-15 and Acts 19:18-20. In Deuteronomy, spiritism of any kind is described as detestable and forcefully denounced. Instead of going to a shaman, Moses call the people of God to listen to the coming prophet—the prophet Jesus (Nabi Isa)! Acts 19 deals with these issues in a complementary fashion by illustrating the nature of repentance for Folk Muslims. There needs to be public confession of occult practices along with the destruction of every charm and amulet (regardless of their monetary value).

But there are other more positive types of power encounters as well. In my early days on the field I met a Muslim named Pono who had heard the gospel and told me he wanted to be saved. With great enthusiasm I shared the gospel with him. But he wasn't impressed. He said he understood but he wanted to be sure of his salvation. So I suggested the possibility that Pono had already accepted Christ but he was

just struggling with sin. I turned to passages in the New Testament about the flesh and the spirit and explained those to him. Pono just shook his head. All of a sudden it dawned on me. This was not an issue of truth encounter. It was an issue of power encounter.

I told him that I was going to lay hands on him and pray that the Holy Spirit would come upon him and fill him. As I laid my hands on Pono and prayed the Holy Spirit came upon him. The power and presence of God filled the room. Pono met God that day and he has never been the same (see Acts 19:16 for a similar experience). Pono had a power encounter. After this experience, I patiently (and sometimes impatiently!) disciplined him. Pono has become the pastor of a Muslim convert church. Signs and wonders, with all perseverance!

Folk Muslims believe they are at the mercy of spirits, demons, evil eye curses and sorcery. Because of this, they are more preoccupied with magic than they are with Muhammad. Folk Muslims push the issue of power encounter to the forefront. The sick need healing. Will they get healed by magic or Christ? The demonized need deliverance. Will the shaman or the missionary do it? The fearful need protection. Will it come through a charm or through Him who came to destroy the works of the devil (I John 3:8)? Power encounter is not the only key to reaching the hearts of Folk Muslims, but it needs to be an essential factor to effectively evangelize Folk Muslims and plant the Church of Jesus Christ in their midst.

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